

Touching the Untouchable
Mark 1:40-45
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It's hard to get bored reading Mark's gospel. Not only is it the shortest of the four, but it is also the most fast-paced one. Mark hits the ground running in the first chapter with Jesus' baptism and the action doesn't stop until the disciples are peering into the empty tomb. In the movie version Jesus would be played by Jackie Chan or Matt Damon, but there would be fewer car chases.

With all this activity going on, the question to ask is: Why did Mark choose to include this story? We know that Jesus did a lot of healing in his ministry. There are 13 healing miracles mentioned in Mark's 16 chapters. He raised people from the dead, restored sight to the blind, made the lame walk. In fact, just a few verses prior to our story, Mark writes, "That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door and Jesus healed many who had various diseases." If that's true, if Jesus is as busy as Mark says he is, why single out this story? Is there something special here we're supposed to see?

One of my favorite movies of all time is "The Untouchables." In fact, only a few months ago I was in Union Station downtown and walked past the staircase where they filmed the famous baby carriage scene. I was tempted to find a stroller and push it down the stairs to see if I could recapture the moment, but I couldn't find any babies will to participate.

In case you aren't familiar with the film, Kevin Costner plays Elliott Ness who goes on a crusade against the evil Al Capone, played by Robert DeNiro. Because Ness was so successful at thwarting Capone's mob business and avoided several assassination attempts, he and his gang were called "The Untouchables," people who were larger than life, who seemed to be above the natural pecking order. The not only upheld the law, they were the law. You don't mess with "The Untouchables."

Jesus is the Elliott Ness of our story today, a one-man crusade against evil. In the span of the first 45 verses of Mark Jesus calls his supporting cast of disciples to help him, rebukes a demon, heals Simon's mother-in-law, cures a whole crowd, preaches in Galilee, and then cleanses our leper, managing to mix in some downtime for prayer. Those who saw Jesus in action must have thought he was larger than life, that he was above the natural pecking order they knew, that he was the law. You don't mess with Jesus.

But there's another untouchable in this story. And he in no way bears a resemblance to Jesus or Elliott Ness or any other hero. The unnamed leper is untouchable for a completely different reason. We aren't sure what the actual disease is that this man suffers from, but we do know it was physically excruciating and a social death sentence.

If it was actual leprosy, the man could have had any number of symptoms. It begins with fatigue and pain in the joints. Then discolored patches appear on the skin. On those patches, little nodules form, turning pink, and then brown. The skin thickens, and the nodules gather in folds on the cheeks, nose, lips and forehead. The face changes drastically in appearance. The nodules continue to grow; they then ulcerate, omitting a foul discharge. The hair starts to fall out; the eyes become staring; the voice becomes

hoarse and the breath wheezes because of ulcerations on the vocal chords. The hands and feet also ulcerate. Slowly and painfully, the sufferer becomes a mass of ulcerated growths.

The physical devastation of leprosy was tragic, but a leper's suffering didn't end there. Because leprosy was highly contagious, some people threw rocks at lepers to keep them at a distance. The leper had to announce his approach with the cry of "Unclean, unclean!" so people would know he was coming. The leper was warning people to not come in contact with him, to stay away. The best way to deal with a leper was to not have to deal with a leper. You don't mess with the untouchables.

But notice in our passage, we don't hear the leper's cry. His arrival is unannounced, unexpected. He ignores the laws he is commanded to obey, not keeping his distance, not announcing his approach. He simply strides right up to Jesus, falls to his knees, and says what he knows to be true. "If you choose...you can make me clean." This repulsive creature dares to break the law in order to gain an audience with Jesus.

So there we have it. A meeting of the untouchables. Clean and unclean. Holy and unholy. Sacred and profane. Divinity and humanity. All Jesus has to do is to walk away, to not risk his own health and reputation by acknowledging this hopeless case. After all, the leper gave him a choice, not an order, not a command. "If you choose..."

Verse 41 tells us Jesus looked upon this man with compassion or pity, but a more accurate translation of the Greek is that he looked at him with anger. Jesus doesn't get angry often, so when he does we better take notice. He's not angry at the leper for breaking the rules or interrupting his day. Jesus is angry because this isn't how it is supposed to be. This isn't way God intended people to live.

So he does something about it. Back then, if you touched a leper, you were considered as unclean as the leper was, and were treated the same way. If you reached out to them, you became one of them. By touching this man, Jesus was in effect putting himself alongside the leper, taking on the same humiliation and limitations the law placed on the leper. Jesus was willing to risk his own health, his own status, even his own life, for this man. And what happens when the divine in Jesus touches the humanity in the leper? Healing happens.

And it's not just a physical healing. The leper wanted more than a change in skin texture. He wanted to be made whole, to be restored in society, to be welcomed back into the world as a human being, not an untouchable. Even though he still must undergo the ritual purification, which Jesus instructs him to do, Christ has taken his brokenness, his physical and spiritual incompleteness, and made him whole.

Let me look around here. No, I don't see any lepers with us this morning. No ulcerating skin, no nodules with foul discharges, some loss of hair, but I'll write that off as natural. Physically, we all look to be leprosy-free.

Of course looks can be deceiving. What looks on the outside like a disfigured, disgusting leper could really be a decent human being looking for a chance to be whole. And what looks on the outside like a normal, healthy person could be someone suffering from emotional or spiritual leprosy. We all have those discolored patches, the ones that omit a foulness that seeps into and infects the rest of our lives. There's something in our life that keeps us from being whole before God. There's someplace where we are incomplete. Broken relationships, hasty judgments about people, addictions, infidelities,

pride, hatred, racism - all these things make us unclean, and we all suffer. Part of being human is admitting that we are less than perfect and that we need healing.

And that's what we have been offered. Through his death and resurrection, through the gift of bread and cup, through the gathering of this body, Christ has reached out his hand to us and offered a healing touch. When Christ's divinity meets our humanity, healing begins again. Regardless of the afflictions and the seriousness of the symptoms, each week at the table we are told over and over again, "I choose. Be made clean!"

The irony here is that the leper is made clean by a touch, when such a thing is usually thought to spread uncleanness. At the church I served in seminary, when the time came for communion, people didn't pass bread trays. They passed the bread. They picked up the loaf, tore off a piece and handed the loaf to the next person. So the cold germs from the person in the first row were shared with everyone else in their section. I don't think that's what is meant by "spreading the gospel."

Reaching out makes us vulnerable. It puts us at risk. Jesus could have walked right by this person, ignored this need, not put his own freedom at risk. The man simply could have stayed sick. You don't mess with the untouchables. And yet when Jesus looks at him, he gets angry at what he sees. And he does something about it.

There are endless examples in this world that this is not how it is supposed to be. Hunger. Loneliness. Disease. Organizations like the Week of Compassion are reaching out, trying to do something about it. But in order to bring healing, we have to get involved. We can't just walk by and ignore the need while people go on being sick. If restoration is going to happen, it will come through us, the hands and feet of Jesus, the one who came to earth to dwell among us, bringing us hope and love and healing. Pastor Will Willimon says, "Jesus got what we got so that we may get what he has." We've got it. What are we going to do with it? Do we not risk getting our hands dirty and just walk on by? That's safer, you know. Cleaner. More convenient. Or do we reach out our hand, touch the untouchable, dare to make a difference in the life of someone this world has discarded. We've got what Jesus has given us - love, forgiveness, compassion, the resources to help. So what are we going to do with it?